

A Call to Compassion

Laura Hobgood-Oster remembers the day Eight Belles was euthanized after finishing second in the 2008 Kentucky Derby. Within an hour of the young filly's death, the ordained minister and Southwestern University professor began writing the second chapter of *The Friends We Keep: Unleashing Christianity's Compassion for Animals*.

Considering that Eight Belle's front legs had snapped like twigs—likely from running too fast and being given performance-enhancing supplements—it seemed appropriate to discuss the sport's contradictions with Christian values. "We have bred for speed and nothing more—and ask them to run at such a young age, before their bones are fully matured," Hobgood-Oster wrote, noting the similar death of Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro two years earlier. "How does this loss of life, this cost of life, for the purpose of entertaining ... fit in Christianity?"

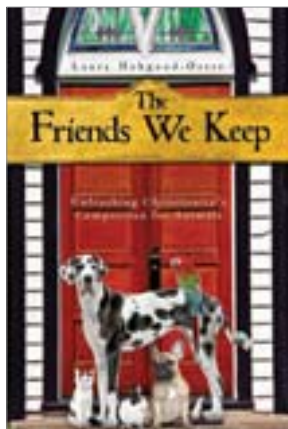
Since 2006, Hobgood-Oster has worked with The HSUS's Faith Outreach Campaign to engage diverse religious communities in animal advocacy. A dog rescuer who became a vegetarian after learning about factory farms, Hobgood-Oster recently spoke with staff writer Ruthanne Johnson in this excerpted interview about animals and Christian tradition.



Q: When did you first wonder about animals in the Bible?

HOBGOOD-OSTER: I had this wonderful rescue dog named Beauregard. He lived 17 years, and going through the process of saying goodbye to him, I started to realize that it was a very important relationship—sacred, really. It was with him in particular that I started to look through Scripture to find animals as companions. I found this story about a man with a wonderful little ewe lamb who was as precious to him even as his own family. And there are wonderful examples in the book of Job where God talks of putting a leash on Leviathan and walking around.

In the year 2000, I went to Assisi for a conference, and it was that trip when I started looking specifically for animals in the biblical texts and the stories of saints and the artwork in the churches and the worship services. I started to find them everywhere. The archway that goes over the church where Francis would have grown up is covered with animals.



Q: What examples of stewardship have you encountered?

HOBGOOD-OSTER: The lifestyle stories told in the Bible always include taking good care of the animals that you are responsible for. There are stories about watering your camels first before you take a drink and letting your animals and fields rest on the Sabbath. You

are not allowed to take a mother bird's eggs. You rotate crops and let the fields lie dormant on the seventh year and let all the animals take [time] off. So the edict seems clear even with the most hierarchical understanding of dominion.

Q: What place does factory farming have in the Christian faith?

HOBGOOD-OSTER: There is nothing in the biblical text that would allow for us to treat animals that way. As a matter of fact, it's the opposite. Throughout the Bible there are passages, like when God says look at how wonderful the ox is, grazing in the field, and the mother hen with her chicks. There are these images of how wonderful these animals are, living as God intended. But the mother hens in factory farms don't even get to see their chicks. Their eggs are taken away and incubated elsewhere. When the chicks hatch, you have these huge conveyor belts with hundreds of little chicks, and their beaks are seared off so they don't injure each other in these tiny spaces they will live in.

Q: How can contemplating animals enrich Christians' lives?

HOBGOOD-OSTER: I think the Christian tradition has been greatly impoverished by forgetting about animals. We have narrowed Christianity so much, only to be about humans, that we've lost sight of all the other animals who are part of the Creation stories. To bring back these parts that we've lost will make it a much richer tradition.

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